

LEARNING ACTIVITY

# Interrogating the Sources: Women in the Revolution



AMERICAN  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
SOCIETY

Library  
& Museum

# INTERROGATING THE SOURCES: WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTION

## Introduction

Pair this learning activity with the short educational film “Julia Stockton Rush: Love and Family Amid War” to explore how primary sources, such as Julia Stockton Rush’s letters, provide us with a better understanding of the era of the American Revolution.

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# LEARNING OBJECTIVES



- Students will learn about the daily life of a woman in late 18th-century America.
- Students will consider what kind of information primary sources contain.
- Students will reflect on the limitations or biases of primary sources.

- Students will practice analyzing primary source documents.
- Students will practice critical thinking skills.
- Students will practice active reading.

# SKILL OBJECTIVES







# INSTRUCTIONS

- Watch the educational film “Julia Stockton Rush: Love and Family Amid War.”
- Look at the original document and read the transcription with comments.
- Use the discussion questions and the historical context sections to help students dive deeper and consider how documents like this provide us with a better understanding of the time period.

Watch Film



<https://youtu.be/v4k-4B3q1GA?si=nrNsMGUjhmZySZ77>

Optional: Try transcribing the original document first on your own and then read the transcription.



# ORIGINAL DOCUMENT

Julia Stockton Rush to Benjamin Rush, July 19, 1783

Wilmington July 19<sup>th</sup> 1783  
Mrs. Rush to N<sup>o</sup>. B. Rush

That my dear husband should have the smallest  
Idea of my having neglected to write to him by the numerous  
opportunities that have gone from hence, cannot but give me  
the greatest uneasiness. I wrote a long letter in answer to your  
most affectionate one by M<sup>r</sup> Wilson and gave it to that gentle-  
man who left this town the day after he came. but last night  
I understood that he did not expect to leave his seat at  
Somerset till Sunday, you therefore will not hear from me  
I suppose till you get this by M<sup>rs</sup> Morgan, which may seem  
inattentive as so many of the Honourable Members have gone  
to Philadelphia in the adjournment of Congress. I spent  
the afternoon in company with M<sup>r</sup> Jacob Read the day before  
he set out, and heard him say he was going to Philadelphia  
but as he knowing my attraction there, did not see fit to ask  
my commands I did not chuse to trouble him, but had I then  
~~known~~ known that M<sup>r</sup> Wilson would not have reached you before  
Sunday, I should <sup>certainly</sup> have availed myself of a former acquaintance  
with M<sup>r</sup> Read and beg'd the favour of him to carry a letter for  
me - ingratitude is to me a crime of deep dye after receiving  
a letter so elegantly affectionate and gratifying to a wife not  
insensible - the least appearance of neglect hurts me ex-  
ceedingly - thus much by way of apology

Dick, coughs very much but he looks very well and has  
a great appetite, he has something of a lara too but not



any thing considerable, Jack had a bad spell of the tooth-  
ach the other day and his face swelled in the night as it  
has often done before, but it did not go down so soon as usual  
and last night I found a hard lump in his neck. I bathed  
it well with rum and oil and put a flannel to it and  
wrapp'd <sup>up</sup> his head very warm, and have confined him today  
the lump is not so large as it was last night and I hope  
will go away with a few more bathings, I wrote you word  
that I would return if you wish'd it, on my own account I have  
seen my friends and am as well satisfied to return immedi-  
ately but the children are often indisposed with one little  
complaint or other and require the particular attention of  
a careful person, the house is constantly or full of compa-  
ny that it is almost impossible for any <sup>but</sup> one, whose heart is im-  
-terested in every thing that concerns them like a mother  
to pay them proper attention. I have my hands full I assure  
you, therefore I fear it will be necessary for me to stay till  
you think it is proper to bring them home but I leave it  
wholly to yourself —

if the Morella cherries are not quite gone  
I wish you would tell M<sup>r</sup> Fisher to get half a dozen pounds  
or more and pickle them they make a most agreeable  
pickle I quite forgot it in the midst of my trouble they  
are very easily done she must put them with the stems  
on in a <sup>wide or shallow</sup> bottle or jar and just put some more cloves  
and nutmegs with them, and cover them with cold  
vinegar she must buy some <sup>if she hasn't got it,</sup> and please to tell her to  
take the walnuts out of the salt & water and put cold



vinegar to them, the vinegar in the barrel is sour  
enough now -

the family all join in love to you let  
me hear from you very often - and believe

me to be with the greatest

friendship and affection

yours most sincerely

J. Bush

# TRANSCRIBED DOCUMENT WITH COMMENTARY

Morven July 19th 1783  
Mrs J. Rush to Dr. B. Rush

That my dear husband should have the smallest  
Idea of my having neglected to write to him by the numerous  
opportunities that have gone from hence, cannot but give me  
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most affectionate one by Mr Wilson and gave it to that gentle-  
- man who left this town the day after he came. but last night  
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the afternoon in company with Mr Jacob Read the day before  
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known that Mr Wilson would not have reach'd you before  
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me - ingratitude is to me a crime of deep [ ] after receiving  
a letter so elegantly affectionate and gratifying to a wife not  
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Dicky coughs very much but he looks very well and has  
a great appetite, he has something of a lase too but not  
any thing considerable, Jack had a bad spell of the tooth-  
- ach the other day and his face swell'd in the night as it  
has often done before. but it did not go down so soon as usual

## Commentary

How do you usually start a letter of email to a loved one? How does Julia?

What does this first paragraph mean? Here Julia shows us how difficult it was just to get a message to someone. She's in Princeton, New Jersey about 45 miles from Philadelphia. She has to find someone traveling to Philadelphia so they can carry the letter for her. It's so frustrating that she sends multiple letters to Benjamin not knowing which will arrive first. How might that affect what she says in the letter?

Mr. Jacob Read was a lawyer from South Carolina who fought in the war and was a prisoner of the British from 1780-1. In 1783 he represented South Carolina in the Continental Congress.



# TRANSCRIBED DOCUMENT WITH COMMENTARY

and last night I found a hard lump in his neck. I bathe'd it well with rum and oil and put a flannel to it and wrap'd up his head very warm, and have confined him today the lump is not so large as it was last night and I hope will go away with a few more bathing. I wrote you word that I would return if you wish'd it, on my own account I have seen my friends and am as well satisfied to return immediately but the children are often indisposed with one little complaint or other and require the particular attention of a careful person. the house is constantly so full of company that it is almost impossible for any but one, whose heart is interested in every thing that concerns them like a mother to pay them proper attention. I have my hands full I assure you, therefore I fear it will be necessary for me to stay till you think it is proper to bring them home but I leave it intirely to yourself -

if the Morella cherries are not quite gone I wish you would tell Mrs Fisher to get half a dozen pounds or more and pickel them they make a most agreeable Pickle I quite forgot it in the midst of my trouble they Are very easily done she must put them with the stems On in a wide mouth'd bottle or jar and just put some mace cloves and nutmeg with them, and cover them with cold vinegar she must buy some spice if she han't got it, and please to tell her to take the walnuts out of the salt & water and put cold vinegar to them, the vinegar in the barrel is sour enough now -

the family all join in love to you but we hear from you very often - and believe me to be with the greatest friendship and affection  
yours most sincerely

J Rush

## Commentary

The second paragraph of the letter mentions a home remedy for a toothache. What do you think of this treatment plan?

Julia then tells Benjamin if he needs her to she will come home, but their children are really needy right now making it difficult for her to leave them with her family. No one can care for them like their mother.

Finally, she ends this letter with a few chores for her husband to do while she's away from the house. What are the chores? Why do you think they may have been important to do?

How does she end her letter? How would you end a letter or email to a loved one today?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- Have you ever written a letter or email to a loved one? What did you include? How did you express your experience(s)?
- What did Julia say in the letter?
- What emotions come across in this letter? How do you think Julia felt when she wrote it?
- Does she mention the war, the peace negotiations, or any other historical event directly? Why do you think that is?
- Julia and Benjamin were part of the wealthy elite. How do you think this impacted her experiences? How might it have been for women less fortunate than her?
- How does this letter provide us with a better understanding of the time period?

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## ■ Who wrote this document?

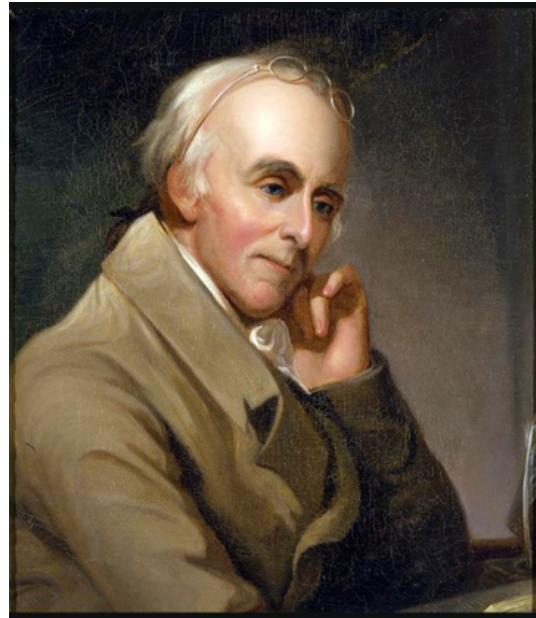
- Julia Stockton Rush was born on March 2, 1759 in Princeton, New Jersey to lawyer Richard Stockton and writer Annis Boudinot Stockton. She was the oldest of six in a wealthy family that valued education.
- In January of 1776, at 16 years old, she married Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia doctor. Just months later Benjamin and Julia's father were both elected to the Second Continental Congress. Both men signed the Declaration of Independence. Her father was arrested soon after by the British, and her husband went off to serve in the American army as a surgeon general. She was left at home pregnant with her first child.
- She was an active supporter of American independence and was part of the Ladies' Association of Philadelphia, a group of prominent Philadelphia women who raised money to purchase cloth and make clothing for the soldiers. Because of her connections and those of Benjamin, she was actively involved in the politics of the time.
- She raised a sizable family of 9 children and much of her writings focus on their care and domestic life in general. Her letters help us see how daily life was and was not affected by the war raging around them.
- She died in 1848 at age 89 and is buried in Christ Church Burial Ground in Philadelphia.
- For more about her and her letters, visit <https://www.amphilsoc.org/blog/revolutionaryphl-julia-stockton-rush-letters>



# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## ■ Who was the letter for?

- Benjamin Rush was born January 4, 1746 in Byberry, just outside of Philadelphia. He was the fourth of seven children to John Rush and Susanna Hall. His father died in 1751 when he was five years old. His mother supported the family by operating a country store.
- He was well-educated, attending Princeton University and the University of Edinburgh. He returned to Philadelphia from Scotland in 1769 to set up his practice and to teach chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania. At this time he was also elected to the American Philosophical Society and published the first chemistry textbook in North America.
- He represented Pennsylvania in the Second Continental Congress and served with Washington's Army as a surgeon general from 1776 until 1778. He resigned over the poor state of medical care for the soldiers and his fellow surgeons' lack of ability.
- He was elected to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention, served as treasurer of the U.S. Mint, trained Lewis and Clark in field medicine for their expedition, was active in treating the yellow fever epidemic in 1793, was the first American to describe and treat mental illness, and was a social activist supporting abolition, women's education, and prison reform.
- He died in 1813 and was buried in Christ Church Burial Ground in Philadelphia.





# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## ■ When was this letter written?

- Julia wrote this letter to Benjamin on July 19, 1783. At that time, she was at her family's estate, Morven, in Princeton, New Jersey and he was in Philadelphia about 45 miles away.
- The fighting had more or less concluded in the war after more than eight years. The Articles of Confederation now guided the governing of the new country, starting in 1781. The country was loosely governed by Congress in Philadelphia, but for the most part the states governed themselves independently.
- Some key events of 1783:
  - February: A preliminary peace agreement was reached between Great Britain and the American states. Fighting was to end.
  - April: Word of the preliminary agreement reaches Philadelphia and Congress ratifies the agreement. Fighting ended.
  - June 20: The Continental Army storms Independence Hall demanding back pay from Congress.
  - July: Those who remained loyal to Great Britain had begun fleeing to Canada earlier in the year. By July land grants were advertised to encourage more migration.
  - September 3: The Treaty of Paris is signed formally ending the Revolutionary War, although it will not be ratified by Congress until January 14, 1784.
  - November 3: The Continental Army is disbanded and by November 25 the last of the British Army left New York City (Evacuation Day).
  - December 23: Washington resigned as commander in chief, giving up power and starting the U.S. tradition of a civilian-led army. He retired to Mount Vernon.





# VOCABULARY

- **Manuscript: A handwritten document**
  - Manuscripts show us handwriting, which can give us insight about a person's level of education, age, ability, and sometimes gender, among other things. Manuscripts can also show us mistakes and revisions.
- **Transcript: A printed or typed version of a document**
  - Not all documents are transcribed. If you use only the ones that are typed out, you miss out on countless handwritten sources. You can still use documents without being able to make out every single word.

Optional: Compare each version of the document to consider the pros, cons, and unique qualities of each format.

# TRANSCRIPTION TIPS

- Brackets [ ] indicate words too difficult to transcribe.
- Misspellings, odd spacing, and grammar errors were more common among even learned people in the 18th century, as there was less formal standardization. British spellings are often used in these documents.
- Try sounding out some of the misspelled words. You will hear the regional accent of the person who wrote them.  
mornin = morning, opportunitys = opportunities, innatentive = inattentive, gratifiing = gratifying, appology = apology, intirely = entirely, han't = has not

# ADDITIONAL DOCUMENT HIGHLIGHTS

The American Philosophical Society holds a small collection of 21 of Julia Stockton Rush's letters. They are available in the digital library:  
<https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text%3AMss.B.R894>

In a 1776 letter that Julia wrote to her uncle, Samuel Stockton in London, she describes her courtship with Benjamin Rush. The letter sheds light on how, perhaps, a spirit of freedom and equality filtered into their personal lives. She wrote that when Benjamin asked for permission from her parents for their engagement, the parents' response was that Julia, "was at [her] own disposal intirely [entirely], that they would never say a word to influence [her] in behalf of any man whatever."

- Julia Stockton Rush to Samuel Stockton, March 14, 1776
- <https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text%3A302202>

The film mentions Julia helped raise money for the war. In many cases, these funds were used to get supplies for prisoners of war on the British ships. Money could help buy them food and supplies since the prisoners were given little to nothing by the British and conditions were poor. For comparison, check out these two letters from Benjamin Rush to Richard Henry Lee, both written January 14, 1777. These letters include descriptions of the injuries and deaths of American soldiers as well as the living conditions of the prisoners of war on the British sloop prison ships:

- Benjamin Rush to Richard Henry Lee, January 14, 1777:  
<https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/apsrevcity%3A16605>
- Benjamin Rush to Richard Henry Lee, January 14, 1777:  
<https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/apsrevcity%3A16306>

Learn more about prisoners of war during the American Revolutionary War from this blog post:

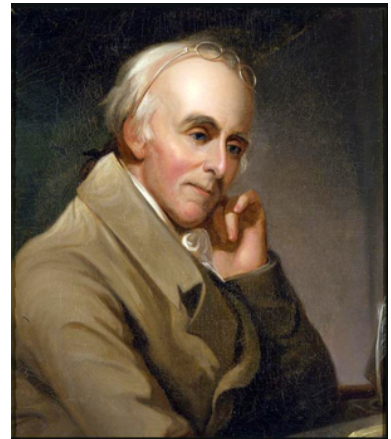
<https://www.amphilsoc.org/blog/prisoners-war-sol-feinstone-collection>

# IMAGE CREDITS



Portrait of Julia Stockton Rush  
Painted by Charles Willson Peale, 1776  
Winterthur Museum  
Wikimedia Commons.

Portrait of Benjamin Rush  
Painted by Charles Willson Peale, 1818  
Independence National Historical Park  
Wikimedia Commons



American Commissioners of the Preliminary  
Peace Agreement with Great Britain  
(unfinished)  
Painted by Benjamin West, 1783 or 1784  
Winterthur Museum  
Wikimedia Commons

# AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

The American Philosophical Society, the oldest learned society in the United States, was founded in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin for the purpose of “promoting useful knowledge.” In the 21st century we sustain this mission in three principal ways. We honor and engage leading scholars, scientists, and professionals through elected membership and opportunities for interdisciplinary, intellectual fellowship, particularly in our semi-annual Meetings. We support research and discovery through grants and fellowships, lectures, publications, prizes, exhibitions, and public education. We serve scholars through a research library of manuscripts and other collections internationally recognized for their enduring historic value. The American Philosophical Society’s current activities reflect the founder’s spirit of inquiry, provide a forum for the free exchange of ideas, and convey our conviction that intellectual inquiry and critical thought are inherently in the best interest of the public.

For more learning resources from the APS visit:  
<https://www.amphilsoc.org/education-resources>

